

Medieval Ballad Analysis for “The Twa Corbies”

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A ballad is a popular form of literature in medieval times, often a narrative set to music. The ballad probably derives its name from medieval French dance songs or "ballares" (from which we also get ballet). They were songs of the common people, passed down in oral tradition. The common people were not literate and paper was very challenging to acquire. Because ballads were not written down, many different variations of each ballad arose throughout time. Frances James Child, an American Scholar, traveled around Europe collecting ballads. He collected and compared them to other forms of the same ballads. He noticed that the verses in ballads varied in different parts of Europe. Most European ballads are written in four line stanzas or quatrains of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, known as ballad meter. The themes of ballads are often alike. Some common themes include, love, betrayal, revenge, and loyalty. They usually have a regular meter, rhyme scheme, and form. Some ballads have regular repetition and dialogue as well. Because they are from long ago and originate in various countries, ballads often contain foreign vocabulary and dialect. The Scottish ballad "The Twa Corbies" is a great tale of treachery and betrayal. This narrative is about two ravens that happen upon the body of a fallen knight, and their discussion about what they are going to do with his remains. It is a wonderful example of medieval balladry and storytelling.

The ballad begins with a person walking alone. He looks up in a tree and notices two ravens boisterously conversing with each other. The first raven asks the other where shall they eat, "Whar shall we gang and dine the day?" (First stanza fourth line) He replies directing the first raven's attention to a slain knight lying in a ditch. He continues saying that the only beings that know he lies there fallen are his hawk, his hound and his wife. All, however, have abandoned the knight, leaving his corpse to be devoured by carrion eaters.

This is an enormous contrast between this ballad and the "The Three Ravens." In "The Three Ravens," an identical situation is presented. There are ravens in a tree asking each other where they wish to dine. A knight also lies dead in a ditch. This time however, the knight's hound and hawk protect his body from carrion eaters. His wife, metaphorically represented by a doe, came to bury him by a lake. She then died of a

broken heart. In “The Twa Corbies,” instead of honoring the fallen knight, the hound and hawk leave to fend for themselves and his wife leaves to find another man. The ravens are therefore guaranteed an undisturbed meal, because no one else knows where the man lies, or even that he is dead. After this, the ravens discuss what they are going to do to the corpse. Their plans include perching on his rib cage and picking out his eyes, using his hair to thicken their nests, and eating the flesh off the bones. After devising their gruesome plans, they laugh, knowing that nobody would ever know what became of the knight. “The Twa Corbies” is a poetic understanding of reality while “The Three Ravens” represents more of an ideal world.

This ballad contains just five stanzas, of four lines each. Each stanza has meter. Meter is the rhythm of a ballad; it describes where the emphasis is placed. Common meters for ballads are 4-3-4-3 and 4-4-4-4. The meter of “The Twa Corbies” is 4-4-4-4.

Stanza one:

As I was walking all alane 4
I heard twa corbies making a mane: 4
The tane unto the tither did say, 4
“Whar shall we gang and dine the day?” 4

The meter remains constant throughout the rest of the four stanzas. Each ballad also has a rhyme scheme, which will also remain the same. Most ballads use one of three different types of rhyme: **ABAC**, **AABB** or **ABCB**. The first type is found in ballads that include a chorus in the verse. The first and third lines of each verse rhyme with each other, while the second and fourth lines do not rhyme with each other or the first or third lines. In the second type, the first and second lines rhyme with each other, as do the third and fourth. This type of ballad may have evolved from the first. The third type is the most common, only the second and fourth lines rhyme. Also, many ballads rhyme a word with itself. The rhyme scheme of “The Twa Corbies” is **AABB**.

Stanza two:

In behint yon auld faul dyke A
I wot there lies a new-slain knight; A
And nobody kens that he lies there B
But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair. B

“The Twa Corbies” has only one line of dialogue, making it different from other ballads. It is the fourth line of the first stanza where the first raven is conversing with the second. “*Whar shall we gang and dine the day?*” Dialogue and repetition of dialogue is common in medieval balladry. However, “The Twa Corbie’s” counterpart “The Three Ravens” contains repetition. In each stanza there is a progression of “Down a down, hey hey down a down,” “with a down” and “with a down, derry, derry, derry down, down.” There is a verse of the ballad followed by a “down” verse. This is repeated throughout the whole ballad. For example:

Stanza one of “The Three Ravens”

There were three ra’ens sat on a tree,

Down a down, hey down a down

They were as black as black might be,

With a down

The one of them said to his mate,

Where shall we our breakfast take?

With a down, derry, derry, derry down down.

This progression continues throughout the ballad. “The Twa Corbies” and “The Three Ravens” both contain dialogue in the last line. However, this concludes the two poems’ similarities.

The theme of “The Twa Corbies” is treachery and betrayal. The hawk, hound, and wife of the slain knight all shame him by only thinking about themselves, leaving the body to be consumed by the ravens. The knight most likely died fighting an honorable battle, and all of his animals and family abandon him.

The vocabulary in the ballad may prove to be difficult. The original words come from Scotland and it would ruin the rhyme scheme to change the wording. For example, in the first line of the first stanza “alane” (alone) would not rhyme with “mane” if it were substituted with a common English word. In the second line, “twa corbies” are “two ravens,” and “making a mane” means “making noise.” In the line with the only dialogue, “Whar shall we gang and dine the day?” means, “Where shall

we gather and eat?" In the first line of the second stanza, the "auld fail dyke" is a "turf ditch." Finally, the "hause-bane" in the fourth stanza means "rib cage." Also in the fourth stanza, "bonny blue e'en" is the "knight's blue eye." The rest of the poem is more or less self-explanatory.

Reading "The Twa Corbies" can become a real intellectual adventure. People wonder, "If I were to die, would my beloved betray me?" Or "Do I deserve such a treatment?" Whatever the answer may be, the sad reality is that a "Twa Corbies" outcome is more true-to-life while "The Three Ravens" portrays more of a fantasy ending. We all want to know what happens to our bodies posthumously, and how our loved ones will react. When someone dies, a person's true feelings towards the deceased come out. Some people might cry, others may react unflinchingly and still others might take advantage of the situation for personal benefit. An example of the latter would be caring more about the money in the will than the actual departed person. With that said, "The Three Ravens" provides a fitting ending. God send every gentleman, such hawkes, such hounds, and such a Leman.